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Storms' toll on budget still unknown

County officials brace for large price tag

by Erin Cunningham and Marcus Moore | Staff Writers

Montgomery County officials say they do not yet know how much it cost to respond to back-to-back blizzards last week.

They do know that the cleanup, which is continuing, will be expensive and comes at a time when the county can least afford it.

"You don't know how much it costs until all of the bills come in," said county spokesman Patrick Lacefield.

There is "no way to know" when that will be, he added.

Lacefield said now is not the time to focus on the cost. For one thing, the employees responsible for calculating the cost are the same ones busy overseeing the recovery effort, he said.

A blizzard in December cost the county about \$5.4 million.

"The two [February] storms together are obviously more than the December blizzard," Lacefield said. "How much more is the question."

On Monday, Larry A. Bowers, the school system's chief operating officer, said the school system will need another week before it knows the impact of last week's snowstorms on its operating budget. School officials still need to calculate the payroll to determine how much overtime was paid to employees, he said.

Last week, Bowers said that some maintenance employees slept at schools over the weekend so they would be available to remove the snow. Contractors also were called in to help with snow removal.

Bowers also suggested that more expenses could arise due to water damage, burst pipes and leaky roofs, but the school system had not yet determined the amount of damage to its facilities.

Lacefield said there is "no way to know" how many county employees were paid overtime to work on storm cleanup. On Friday, he said, employees were still being paid overtime in connection with the recovery effort.

Montgomery County Council members say they are unsure of the impact of the snow removal efforts on the fiscal 2010 budget. The council already has approved about \$100 million in midyear budget cuts in fiscal 2010.

The county is facing a \$608 million budget hole in fiscal 2011 that could grow to about \$690 million due to a loss of tax revenue and revenue from the county's speed cameras, as well as the cost of responding to several large snowstorms this season, Joseph Beach, director of the county's Office of Management and Budget, said Feb. 9.

"I'm sure it's going to cost a bundle," said Montgomery County Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park. "But that's the job of government. That's life."

Council member Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg said the cost of the storm likely will include residual damage, such as more potholes.

"I'm actually driving as we speak on Georgia Avenue, and I see more potholes here than the last time I drove," Andrews said. "I'm sure it will be very expensive."

Andrews and other council members said the county did its best to respond to the record-breaking snowfalls.

Council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said she gave the county a "very good grade" for its response.

"They did a very good job," she said Monday. "I'm not saying they're excellent, but very good."

Floreen said Monday that the complaints from constituents who were unhappy with snow removal in their neighborhoods had slowed and that the county is now focused on making sidewalks safe for pedestrians.